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So Immense

*The Louisiana Purchase and
the Destiny of America*

Jon Kukla

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JON KUKLA

A Wilderness So Immense

Jon Kukla received his B.A. from Carthage College and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Toronto. He has directed historical research and publishing at the Library of Virginia and has been curator and director of the Historic New Orleans Collection. In 2000 he returned to Virginia as director of the Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation. He lives in Charlotte County, Virginia.

ALSO BY JON KUKLA

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EDITOR:

The Bill of Rights: A Lively Heritage (1987)

*A Key to Survey Reports and Microfilm of the Virginia Colonial
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*A Guide to the Papers of Pierre Clement Laussat,
Napoleon's Prefect for the Colony of Louisiana,
and of General Claude Perrin Victor* (1993)

Will republicans, who glory in their sacred regard to the rights of human nature, purchase an immense wilderness for the purpose of cultivating it with the labor of slaves?

—*The Balance and Columbian Repository*, September 20, 1803

Louisiana is ours! If we rightly improve the heaven sent boon, we may be as great, and as happy a nation, as any on which the sun has ever shone. The establishment of independence, and of our present constitution, are prior, both in time and importance; but with these two exceptions, the acquisition of Louisiana, is the greatest political blessing ever conferred on these states.

—Dr. David Ramsay, May 12, 1804

No event in all American history—not the Civil War, nor the Declaration of Independence, nor even the signing of the Constitution—was more important.

—Bernard DeVoto, March 21, 1953

A Wilderness So Immense

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE AND
THE DESTINY OF AMERICA

JON KUKLA



ANCHOR BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

NEW YORK

*For Amy,
for Jennifer,
and for Elizabeth*



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Tributaries

The Mississippi will be one of the principal channels of future commerce for the country westward of the Alleghaney. From the mouth of this river to where it receives the Ohio, is 1,000 miles by water, but only 500 by land.... The Mississippi, below the mouth of the Missouri, is always muddy....

The Missouri is, in fact, the principal river, contributing more to the common stream than does the Mississippi, even after its junction with the Illinois. It is remarkably cold, muddy, and rapid....

The Ohio is the most beautiful river on earth. Its current gentle, waters clear, and bosom smooth and unbroken by rocks and rapids, a single instance only excepted... three or four miles below Louisville.

—Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1785¹

IN THE PINE WOODS of northern Minnesota, about one hundred eighty miles inland from Lake Superior and the port of Duluth, the Mississippi River begins its winding journey of 2,552 miles from Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico. As it flows out of the lake to begin a pilgrimage through the heartland of North America, the shallow brook is about a dozen yards wide. Passing tamarack bogs and the burial mounds of the Anishinabe, the river gains width and depth. Fed by scores of glacial ponds and lakes, the Mississippi tumbles over the Falls of St. Anthony, between Minneapolis and St. Paul. Navigable from there to the Gulf, the mighty river swells with the water of tributary creeks and streams that drain more than a million square miles of farmland and forest. As lesser rivers converge into the larger tributaries that join the Mississippi—the St. Croix River at Point Douglas, Minnesota, the Wisconsin at Prairie du Chien, and the Illinois at Grafton—the Mississippi sprawls to half a mile wide or more to greet its peers, the Missouri at St. Louis and the Ohio at Cairo, Illinois. Born of this trinity, the Mississippi River below Cairo rolls omnipotently across the alluvial land that it deposited after the last ice age.²

The power and destiny of the Lower Mississippi is scarcely imaginable along the north shore of Lake Itasca, where picnic tables sheltered by tall pines dwarf the tiny stream. Here, fifty years ago, a tow-headed and dimpled midwestern child splashed from rock to rock across the shallow brook, cheerfully ignorant that he was ankle deep in the first tide of a turbulent force of nature and history. Everything impressive about the Mississippi River lay far downstream in his distant future. In time the child who splashed over stepping-stones at Lake Itasca swam against the lazy summer current at Wyalusing State Park. He heard calls

for volunteers to pack sandbags against the angry flood near Prairie du Chien. And he stood on the levee at Jackson Square, far below the tributary streams of his childhood, watching the all-powerful and unforgiving river send enormous oceangoing ships skidding through the treacherous bends at New Orleans. As age, distance, and experience revealed the connections between that tiny crystal brook at Lake Itasca and the mighty muddy flood of the Lower Mississippi, the man who long ago played in the clear waters of the Upper Mississippi came to realize that the story of the Louisiana Purchase had its tributaries, too.

At the end of the American Revolution, the Louisiana Purchase lay hidden far beyond the horizon, twenty years downstream into the future. The background stories that comprise its tributaries were as distant from one another as are the easternmost headwaters of the Ohio River—on the Allegheny near Coudersport, Pennsylvania—from the mountain creek near Dillon, Montana, that eventually becomes the Missouri. Like gravity pulling water through a great river system toward the sea, time brought together the stories from Paris, Madrid, New Orleans, New York, Kentucky, and Haiti that finally converged in the monumental events of 1803.

In 1803 the destiny of North America was formally decided by men who never set foot in the Mississippi Valley, who never walked the narrow streets of the Vieux Carré in New Orleans, and who never laid eyes on the rivers that drain an expanse of field and forest slightly larger than Western Europe. Thomas Jefferson never traveled west of the Shenandoah Valley, Robert R. Livingston never got beyond the Catskills, James Monroe never made it west of Nashville, Tennessee. Napoleon Bonaparte never visited America, and his ministers knew only the Atlantic Coast. François Barbé-Marbois once visited the Mohawk Valley from his diplomatic post in New York City during the last years of the American Revolution, and Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord sat out the Reign of Terror in Philadelphia. The key participants in the diplomatic story of the Louisiana Purchase were statesmen in Europe and America who knew the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers only as lines on a map, and the Missouri River only as a legend at third hand. The territory of Louisiana itself was a wilderness so immense that its boundaries remained indefinite for years.

The destiny of America was decided by women and men who crossed the Appalachians into Kentucky and floated their produce to New Orleans on flatboats and bateaux, but their determination was shaped by statesmen with maps and imagination. None of them studied or dreamt more grandly than Thomas Jefferson. No one knew it at the time—least of all Jefferson himself—but elements of the Louisiana Purchase first began to take shape in his map-strewn study near the Champs-Élysées at the edge of Paris in January 1786.

Piece by Piece

Our confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North and South is to be peopled. We should take care to not... press too soon on the Spaniards. Those countries cannot be in better hands. My fear is that they are too feeble to hold them till our population can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them peice by peice. The navigation of the Mississippi we must have. This is all we are as yet ready to receive.

—Thomas Jefferson to Archibald Stuart, January 25, 1786¹

Mortar never becomes so hard and adhesive to the bricks in a few months but that it may easily be chipped off.

—Thomas Jefferson to William Buchanan and James Hay,
January 25, 1786²

THE SKIES OVER Paris were cloudy on Wednesday, January 25, 1786, and the early morning temperature was 42 degrees in the courtyard of the elegant new mansion, the Hôtel de Langeac, at the corner of the Champs-Élysées and rue de Berri just inside the western wall of the city. Designed by Jean F. T. Chalgrin, who later built the Arc de Triomphe, the neoclassical townhouse served from 1785 through 1789 as the office and residence of the forty-two-year-old United States minister to the court of Louis XVI, Thomas Jefferson.

A decade earlier, on July 1, 1776, Jefferson had started a lifelong practice of recording the temperature every day when he rose and again at midafternoon. At first he sometimes checked the temperature four times a day—as he did in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776, perhaps to test the new thermometer he had purchased on that historic day for three pounds, fifteen shillings from John Sparhawk. Soon he had established a routine: “My method,” he explained, is to make two observations a day the one as early as possible in the morning, the other from 3. to 4. a'clock, because I have found 4. a'clock the hottest and day light the coldest point of the 24. hours. I state them in an ivory pocket book ... and copy them out once a week.³



Thomas Jefferson, about 1787. Despondent over the death of his wife, Jefferson found refuge in his appointment as American minister to the court of Louis XVI in 1784. Three years later the artist John Trumbull captured Jefferson in a life portrait for his famous Declaration of Independence. This unsigned watercolor is a copy of Trumbull's original. The artist was a frequent visitor at Jefferson's Hotel de Langeac starting in 1785, when the two men toured the public buildings of Paris as Jefferson was contemplating the design of a new Capitol for Virginia—as well as the future of North America. (Courtesy Virginia Historical Society, Richmond)

Jefferson cluttered his pockets with gadgets. The ivory notebooks in which he recorded meteorological data looked like small fans—their pages were wafers the size of business cards joined at one end by a brass rivet. Jefferson jotted his daily notes in pencil on the ivory, and after copying the information into the leather-bound memorandum book at his desk, he wiped the ivory clean for the week ahead.

Eighteenth-century thermometers were large, and Jefferson bought at least twenty of them during his lifetime—along with nearly every other scientific gizmo that caught his eye in Paris or London. He recorded the temperature every morning, with rare exceptions, from the dawn of American independence until shortly before his death at Monticello on July 4, 1826. In the afternoon, other activities occasionally interrupted his daily routine. Nevertheless, over the course of fifty years Thomas Jefferson recorded the morning temperature virtually every day between 5:30 and 8:00 a.m. and the midafternoon temperature, on average, about six days out of seven. He would have loved the Weather Channel.

While in Paris, Jefferson also acquired two kinds of hygrometers to measure

relative humidity. Their appeal was irresistible, but if he had felt any hesitation about buying these instruments, the perfect excuse was at hand. He needed them to refute a theory advanced by his new acquaintance, the great French naturalist George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon. America, the naturalist contended, was more humid than Europe. Moreover, Buffon maintained that high humidity contributed to a universal degeneracy that he ascribed to *all* the plants, animals, and people of the New World. Jefferson knew better. Paris itself was damp, and Jefferson had felt its ill effects for months after his arrival. But the question was a scientific one, and the patriotic spokesman for the Western Hemisphere needed proof. The new hygrometers were weapons in Jefferson's battle against Buffon's theory.⁴



Twice a day, at dawn and again at midafternoon, Thomas Jefferson recorded the temperature and weather conditions on ivory pocket notebooks. Each week for half a century, from July 1, 1776, to within months of his death on Independence Day 1826, Jefferson transcribed the accumulated meteorological data into a leather-bound folio volume, wiped his pencil notes from the ivory wafers, and started anew. (Courtesy Monticello—The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Inc.)

At 42 degrees, the courtyard at Langeac was chilly. On a warmer morning, after recording the temperature Jefferson might have wandered the curving paths of the garden, planted in the fashionable and informal “English” style, in Romantic contrast to the classical symmetry of the great French gardens such as Versailles. In the “hot house” at the far corner of the property, he might have inquired about seeds or seedlings imported from America and entrusted to the care of his gardener, a Frenchman whose identity has been lost to history. Or, crossing the courtyard to the porter's lodge, Jefferson might have said *bonjour!* to his coachman, Anselm, and glanced into the stables, carriage house, and harness room.⁵

Save for the papers in his office, nothing in the mansion demanded Jefferson's attention that morning. His twenty-six-year-old secretary and

protégé, William Short, had rooms at Langeac, but Short and his manservant, Boullié, were away. The kitchen had been without a scullery maid since December, but the Monticello slave James Hemings, who had come to France with Jefferson and his eldest daughter, Martha, was in the kitchen with his culinary mentor, a female chef whose name we do not know. Hemings had come to Paris for the express purpose of learning to cook, and Jefferson, who was almost a vegetarian, attached unusual significance to his gastronomical training. Abigail Adams, wife of his diplomatic counterpart at the Court of St. James's in London, gleefully recounted Jefferson's opinion of meat-eating Englishmen to her sister. "Says he," Abigail reported,

it must be the quantity of Animal food eaten by the English which renders their Character unsusceptible of civilisation. I suspect that it is in their kitchens and not in their Churches, that their reformation must be worked.

Parisian chefs, Jefferson felt certain, could do more good for the English than missionaries "endeavoring] to tame them by precepts of religion or philosophy"⁶

Marc, the butler in the main house, had responsibility for five large rooms on the first floor as well as Jefferson's office suite, three main bedrooms, and secondary rooms upstairs. His stewardship was assisted by Sansón, a *valet de chambre* filling in for Adrienne Petit, and the *frotteur* Saget. Painted floors were the fashion of the day, and they required constant attention. Before John and Abigail Adams left Paris for London, Abigail had watched in amazement as her floors had been painted first with pigment and glue and "afterward with melted wax, and then rubbed with a hard Brush; upon which a Man sets his foot and with his Arms a kimbow strip[p]ed to his Shirt, goes driving round your room. This Man is called a Frotteurer, and is a Servant kept on purpose for the Business."⁷

While Saget skated around the Hotel de Langeac on footbrushes and five or six French employees and James Hemings looked after the house and garden, the labor of the consulate fell entirely to Jefferson himself. Although Jefferson had invited Short to Paris as his personal secretary, Short often traveled on diplomatic business or stayed at the small house in the village of Saint Germain where he had perfected his French. The charming young Virginia bachelor, who now spoke fluent French and moved gracefully in polite society, had become more useful to the nation as an apprentice diplomat than as Jefferson's clerk. And if truth be told, Jefferson really preferred the immediacy, intimacy, and confidentiality of his own pen, even if, when he broke his wrist later that year, it meant learning to scrawl with the quill in his left hand.⁸

In the months since his arrival to succeed Benjamin Franklin as minister to France, the charms of Paris had not yet enthralled the Virginian. He found the climate cold and damp—at least at first. Injury makes us vulnerable, we feel

the cold more intensely, and Jefferson had come to Paris profoundly wounded by personal tragedy and the ingratitude of political life. In truth, Thomas Jefferson had fled to Paris and found refuge there in his study and his work.

A chilly morning was no time to dawdle out of doors, and on this particular Wednesday there was much to be done. At long last, Jefferson's final architectural drawings for the new Capitol of Virginia were ready for shipment to Richmond, and a reliable courier was leaving for America the next day. Ezra Bates could be entrusted with all the correspondence that Thomas Jefferson's one-man office could prepare for his Thursday departure. Then the minister could relax with his thirteen-year-old daughter, Martha, a student in residence at the Abbaye Royale de Panthémont, a convent school favored by English families. Panthémont was regarded as the most genteel school in Paris, and Patsy, as she was known to her father—she was “Jeffy” to her schoolmates—had been admitted on the recommendation of a friend of the marquis de Lafayette. She spent Thursdays and Sundays with her father, and they indulged a shared passion for music by playing together on the violin and harpsichord.⁹

Patsy's visits were the bright moments of Jefferson's early years in Paris. As governor of Virginia near the end of the American Revolution, Jefferson and his government had been embarrassed when British cavalry led by Benedict Arnold and Banastre Tarleton raided Richmond, Charlottesville, and Monticello. Like chess players quickly moving their pieces to avoid capture or checkmate, Governor Jefferson had scrambled south to his Bedford County retreat, Poplar Forest, while his councillors and the legislature had scurried over the Blue Ridge Mountains to Staunton. When the danger was long gone—after the American army and French navy engineered the siege and surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown—a legislative inquiry formally exonerated Jefferson of any hint of misconduct during the emergency. But the inquiry itself still rankled him.

Tall and lanky, Jefferson had the fair and sometimes freckled complexion of a redheaded Englishman. After retiring from the presidency in 1809 he cultivated an air of philosophic serenity, high above the rough and tumble of politics, but as a younger man Governor Jefferson was thin-skinned and easily stung by criticism. By the 1780s he had devoted a dozen years to public service, and the legislative inquest seemed an ungrateful insult. Enough was enough. On the day the legislature of Virginia unanimously voted its gratitude for “his impartial, upright, and attentive administration whilst in office”—on the day the senators and representatives of the Old Dominion voiced their “high opinion ... of Mr. Jefferson's ability, rectitude, and integrity, as Chief Magistrate of this Commonwealth”—on that very day Jefferson declined election as a delegate to Congress.¹⁰

“I am fond of quiet,” Jefferson confided later to his friend Abigail Adams, “willing to do my duty, but irritable by slander and apt to be forced by it to abandon my post.” He was more specific in a letter to James Monroe. “I might

have comforted myself under the disapprobation of the well-meaning but uninformed people,” he wrote,

yet that of their representatives was a shock.... And I felt that these injuries, for such they have been since acknowledged, had inflicted a wound on my spirit which will only be cured by the all-healing grave.

Bruised by the public indignities of politics, Jefferson set aside his bitterness to tell Abigail that “Mrs. Jefferson has added another daughter to our family,” but “has been ever since and still continues very dangerously ill.”¹¹

Martha Wayles Jefferson languished in her bed after the birth of Lucy Elizabeth. Jefferson nursed her through the summer, “never out of Calling. When not at her bed side he was writing in a small room at the head of her bed.” Ten months after the legislature’s clumsy effort “to obviate and remove all unmerited censure” about his actions during Tarleton’s raid, private grief compounded Jefferson’s public embarrassment.¹²

When Martha Wayles Jefferson died on September 6, 1782, her husband “was led from the room almost in a state of insensibility ... into his library where he fainted and remained so long insensible that they feared he never would revive.” He kept to his room for three weeks, pacing the floor night and day, ignoring the beauty of Monticello in early autumn, as buttery maple leaves floated above the morning fog or gleamed in the afternoon sun.¹³

The legislature convened in Richmond, and his friends dispatched one of their number to Monticello. Jefferson was “inconsolable,” cloistered away on his mountain, stricken with a grief “so violent as to justify the circulating report of his swooning away whenever he sees his children.”¹⁴

Outside, on the hills around Monticello in the middle of October, tawny oak leaves diffuse the midday sun until it drifts to the ground without casting a shadow, and the horizontal rays of the setting sun silhouette the trees and light up the ruby foliage of dogwoods and sumac like candlelight through a glass of vintage claret. The beauty of autumn in Virginia escaped his notice. “When at last he left his room,” Jefferson “was incessantly on horseback rambling about the mountain.”¹⁵

As the trees went bare, their bony fingers warned of the approaching winter, a landscape suitably bleak for his “melancholy rambles.” Young Martha was “a solitary witness to many a violent burst of grief”—until the 25th of October, when a courier arrived at Monticello with a letter from Philadelphia. Congress wanted to send Jefferson to Paris as a peace commissioner to help negotiate the treaty that would end the American Revolution. Perhaps, his friends hoped, the appointment might lure him back into public life and assuage his private grief.¹⁶

Their ploy worked. Under the cover of duty, he could flee to France. After

eleven weeks of virtual silence since Martha's death, Jefferson began "emerging from that stupor of mind which had rendered me as dead to the world as was she whose loss occasioned it." When he had left office at the end of his term as governor, Jefferson had told the marquis d'Chastellux that he had "folded [him]self in the arms of retirement, and rested all prospects of future happiness on domestic and literary objects"—including the composition of his *Notes on the State of Virginia*—but

a single event wiped away all my plans and left me a blank which I had not the spirits to fill up. In this state of mind an appointment from Congress found [them] requiring me to cross the Atlantic.¹⁷

He would escape his grief by traveling to France and immersing himself in work.

Jefferson's morning ritual of jotting the temperature into his ivory notebooks had therapeutic as well as scientific value, for his heart was "a blank" and "dead to the world." The pain of Martha's death was still with him, and of their six children, only two survived. Two daughters had died at five months. A son had lived only seventeen days. Most recently, word had come from Virginia to Paris that whooping cough, "most horrible of all disorders," had claimed his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Lucy Elizabeth. Jefferson had left Lucy and her sister Mary in the care of his relatives, Elizabeth and Francis Eppes, at Eppington, in Chesterfield County. Arrangements were soon under way to retrieve Mary from the plantation south of Richmond and reunite her in Paris with her father and only surviving sister—a feat that took nearly two years to accomplish.¹⁸

Mary Jefferson, later known as Maria, reached London in June 1787 and stayed with John and Abigail Adams, who called her Polly. Her companion crossing the Atlantic was not the mature slave woman Isabel, whom Jefferson had requested, but James Hemings's fourteen-year-old sister. "The old Nurse whom you expected," Abigail wrote announcing Polly's safe arrival in London, "was sick and unable to come. She has a Girl about 15 or 16 with her, the Sister of the Servant you have with you."¹⁹

Their own children were in their teens and twenties, and the Adamses welcomed Jefferson's nine-year-old Polly "and the maid" into their not-quite-empty nest. Abigail did all "such things as I should have done had they been my own." Polly had been "5 weeks at sea, and with men only, so that on the first day of her arrival, she was as rough as a little sailor," but the next day Abigail took her shopping "and purchased her a few articles which she could not well do without"—spending about £12 on clothing for Polly and "the maid." In a few days Polly was "the favorite of every creature in the House"—"She stands by me while I write and asks if I write every day to her pappa?"²⁰

Jefferson immediately dispatched Adrienne Petit across the Channel to fetch Polly. He was profoundly grateful for Abigail's "kind attention to my little daughter," and yet fearful (as fathers at heart-wrenching distance often are) that good intentions might be misunderstood. Having "formed an attachment to you," he lamented to Abigail, "she will think I am made only to tear her from her affections. I wish I could have come myself." For her part, having come to know Jefferson's "amiable lovely Child" and "dear little Girl," Abigail Adams could not "but feel Sir, how many pleasures you must lose by committing her to a convent. Yet situated as you are, you cannot keep her with you."²¹

At first glance, Sally Hemings struck Abigail Adams as older than her years: "about 15 or 16." Abigail never mentioned Sally's name in her letters to Jefferson (and John Adams did not mention either of the girls in his correspondence), but that did not matter. There was something that only folks from Monticello knew about "the girl," or "the maid," and her brother. James and Sally Hemings were family.²²

Jefferson's father-in-law, John Wayles, had outlived three wives and then openly settled his affections on his mulatto slave Elizabeth Hemings. They had six children together. Sally was the youngest, born in 1773, the same year that Wayles's death brought Elizabeth Hemings and her family to Monticello. Sally Hemings was Patsy and Polly Jefferson's aunt. Her brother James, busy mastering French cuisine at the Hotel de Langeac, was their uncle. Now fourteen but easily mistaken for sixteen, the fair-complected Sally Hemings was said to resemble her half-sister Martha Wayles, the girl Jefferson had married when she was twenty-three and for whom he still grieved. Once Polly Jefferson came to Paris and joined her sister Patsy at the convent school of the Abbaye Royale de Panthémont in 1787, perhaps the only employee lacking in the Jefferson household was a chaperone—although it seems likely that Jefferson's sexual relationship with Sally Hemings began only after they returned to Virginia.

Folding the ivory notebook and slipping it into a pocket, Jefferson carried his thermometer across the burnished floors of the Hotel de Langeac and retired upstairs to his study. His penknife and goose quill rested near the inkwell and a stack of rag paper. A sheaf of maps were on hand, as were the neatly packaged final architectural drawings of his design for the new Capitol of Virginia. The comfort of busyness awaited him.

First, Jefferson dashed off a confidential note to John Jay, the New York jurist and former diplomat to Paris and Madrid. As secretary for foreign affairs, Jay was the chief diplomatic officer of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, and Jefferson was happy to report that an unnamed "person"—neither of them called him a gentleman—had passed quietly